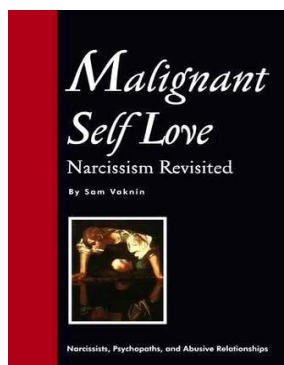


Workaholism, Leisure and Pleasure

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In his book, "A Farewell to Alms" (Princeton University Press, 2007), Gregory Clark, an economic historian at the University of California, Davis, suggests that downward social mobility in England caused the Industrial Revolution in the early years of the 19th century. As the offspring of peasants died off of hunger and disease, the numerous and cosseted descendants of the British upper middle classes took over their jobs.

These newcomers infused their work and family life with the values that made their luckier forefathers wealthy and prominent. Above all, they introduced into their new environment Max Weber's Protestant work ethic: leisure is idleness, toil is good, workaholism is the best. As Clark put it:

“Thrift, prudence, negotiation and hard work were becoming values for communities that previously had been spendthrift, impulsive, violent and leisure loving.”

Such religious veneration of hard labor resulted in a remarkable increase in productivity that allowed Britain (and, later, its emulators the world over) to escape the [Malthusian Trap](#). Production began to outstrip population growth.

But the pendulum seems to have swung back. Leisure is again both fashionable and desirable.

The official working week in France has been reduced to 35 hours a week (though the French are now tinkering with it). In most countries in the world, it is limited to 45 hours a week. The trend during the last century seems to be unequivocal: less work, more play.

Yet, what may be true for blue collar workers or state employees - is not necessarily so for white collar members of the liberal professions. It is not rare for these people - lawyers, accountants, consultants, managers, academics - to put in 80 hour weeks.

The phenomenon is so widespread and its social consequences so damaging that it has acquired the unflattering nickname workaholism, a combination of the words "work" and "alcoholism". Family life is disrupted, intellectual horizons narrow, the consequences to the workaholic's health are severe: fat, lack of exercise, stress - all take their lethal toll. Classified as "alpha" types, workaholics suffer three times as many heart attacks as their peers.

But what are the social and economic roots of this phenomenon?

Put succinctly, it is the outcome of the blurring of boundaries between work and leisure. This distinction between time dedicated to labour and time spent in the pursuit of one's hobbies - was so clear for thousands of years that its gradual disappearance is one of the most important and profound social changes in human history.

A host of other shifts in the character of work and domestic environments of humans converged to produce this momentous change. Arguably the most important was the increase in labour mobility and the fluid nature of the very concept of work and the workplace.

The transitions from agriculture to industry, then to services, and now to the knowledge society, increased the mobility of the workforce. A farmer is the least mobile. His means of production are fixed, his produce mostly consumed locally - especially in places which lack proper refrigeration, food preservation, and transportation.

A marginal group of people became nomad-traders. This group exploded in size with the advent of the industrial revolution. True, the bulk of the workforce was

still immobile and affixed to the production floor. But raw materials and finished products travelled long distances to faraway markets. Professional services were needed and the professional manager, the lawyer, the accountant, the consultant, the trader, the broker - all emerged as both parasites feeding off the production processes and the indispensable oil on its cogs.

The protagonists of the services society were no longer geographically dependent. They rendered their services to a host of geographically distributed "employers" in a variety of ways. This trend accelerated today, with the advent of the information and knowledge revolution.

Knowledge is not geography-dependent. It is easily transferable across boundaries. It is cheaply reproduced. Its ephemeral quality gives it non-temporal and non-spatial qualities. The locations of the participants in the economic interactions of this new age are transparent and immaterial.

These trends converged with increased mobility of people, goods and data (voice, visual, textual and other). The twin revolutions of transportation and telecommunications really reduced the world to a global village. Phenomena like commuting to work and multinationals were first made possible.

Facsimile messages, electronic mail, other forms of digital data, the Internet - broke not only physical barriers but also temporal ones. Today, virtual offices are not only spatially virtual - but also temporally so. This means that workers can collaborate not only across continents but also across time zones. They can leave their work for someone else to continue in an electronic mailbox, for instance.

These technological advances precipitated the transmutation of the very concepts of "work" and "workplace". The three Aristotelian dramatic unities no longer applied. Work could be performed in different places, not simultaneously, by workers who worked part time whenever it suited them best.

Flextime and work from home replaced commuting (much more so in the Anglo-Saxon countries, but they have always been the harbingers of change). This fitted squarely into the social fragmentation which characterizes today's world: the disintegration of previously cohesive social structures, such as the nuclear (not to mention the extended) family.

All this was neatly wrapped in the ideology of individualism, presented as a private case of capitalism and liberalism. People were encouraged to feel and behave as distinct, autonomous units. The perception of individuals as islands replaced the former perception of humans as cells in an organism.

This trend was coupled with - and enhanced by - unprecedented successive multi-annual rises in productivity and increases in world trade. New management

techniques, improved production technologies, innovative inventory control methods, automatization, robotization, plant modernization, telecommunications (which facilitates more efficient transfers of information), even new design concepts - all helped bring this about.

But productivity gains made humans redundant. No amount of retraining could cope with the incredible rate of technological change. The more technologically advanced the country - the higher its structural unemployment (i.e., the level of unemployment attributable to changes in the very structure of the market).

In Western Europe, it shot up from 5-6% of the workforce to 9% in one decade. One way to manage this flood of ejected humans was to cut the workweek. Another was to support a large population of unemployed. The third, more tacit, way was to legitimize leisure time. Whereas the Jewish and Protestant work ethics condemned idleness in the past - the current ethos encouraged people to contribute to the economy through "self realization", to pursue their hobbies and non-work related interests, and to express the entire range of their personality and potential.

This served to blur the historical differences between work and leisure. They are both commended now. Work, like leisure, became less and less structured and rigid. It is often pursued from home. The territorial separation between "work-place" and "home turf" was essentially eliminated.

The emotional leap was only a question of time. Historically, people went to work because they had to. What they did after work was designated as "pleasure". Now, both work and leisure were pleasurable - or torturous - or both. Some people began to enjoy their work so much that it fulfilled the functions normally reserved to leisure time. They are the workaholics. Others continued to hate work - but felt disorientated in the new, leisure-like environment. They were not taught to deal with too much free time, a lack of framework, no clear instructions what to do, when, with whom and to what end.

Socialization processes and socialization agents (the State, parents, educators, employers) were not geared - nor did they regard it as their responsibility - to train the population to cope with free time and with the baffling and dazzling variety of options on offer.

We can classify economies and markets using the work-leisure axis. Those that maintain the old distinction between (hated) work and (liberating) leisure - are doomed to perish or, at best, radically lag behind. This is because they will not have developed a class of workaholics big enough to move the economy ahead.

It takes workaholics to create, maintain and expand capitalism. As opposed to common opinion, people, mostly, do not do business because they are interested in money (the classic profit motive). They do what they do because they like the

Game of Business, its twists and turns, the brainstorming, the battle of brains, subjugating markets, the ups and downs, the excitement. All this has nothing to do with money. It has everything to do with psychology. True, money serves to measure success - but it is an abstract meter, akin to monopoly money. It is proof of shrewdness, wit, foresight, stamina, and insight.

Workaholics identify business with pleasure. They are hedonistic and narcissistic. They are entrepreneurial. They are the managers and the businessmen and the scientists and the journalists. They are the movers, the shakers, the pushers, the energy.

Without workaholics, we would have ended up with "social" economies, with strong disincentives to work. In these economies of "collective ownership" people go to work because they have to. Their main preoccupation is how to avoid it and to sabotage the workplace. They harbour negative feelings. Slowly, they wither and die (professionally) - because no one can live long in hatred and deceit. Joy is an essential ingredient of survival.

And this is the true meaning of capitalism: the abolition of the artificial distinction between work and leisure and the pursuit of both with the same zeal and satisfaction. Above all, the (increasing) liberty to do it whenever, wherever, with whomever you choose.

Unless and until Homo East Europeensis changes his state of mind - there will be no real transition. Because transition happens in the human mind much before it takes form in reality. It is no use to dictate, to legislate, to finance, to cajole, or to bribe. It was Marx (a devout non-capitalist) who noted the causative connexion between reality (being) and consciousness. How right was he. Witness the prosperous USA and compare it to the miserable failure that was communism.

From an Interview I Granted

Question: In your article, Workaholism, Leisure and Pleasure, you describe how the line between leisure and work has blurred over time. What has allowed this to happen? What effect does this blurring have on the struggle to achieve a work-life balance?

Answer: The distinction between work and leisure times is a novelty. Even 70 years ago, people still worked 16 hours a day and, many of them, put in 7 days a week. More than 80% of the world's population still live this way. To the majority of people in the developing countries, work was and is life. They would perceive the contrast between "work" and "life" to be both artificial and perplexing. Sure, they dedicate time to their families and communities. But there is little leisure left to read, nurture one's hobbies, introspect, or attend classes.

Leisure time emerged as a social phenomenon in the twentieth century and mainly in the industrialized, rich, countries.

Workaholism - the blurring of boundaries between leisure time and time dedicated to work - is, therefore, simply harking back to the recent past. It is the inevitable outcome of a confluence of a few developments:

(1) **Labour mobility** increased. A farmer is attached to his land. His means of production are fixed. His markets are largely local. An industrial worker is attached to his factory. His means of production are fixed. Workers in the services or, more so, in the knowledge industries are attached only to their laptops. They are much more itinerant. They render their services to a host of geographically distributed "employers" in a variety of ways.

(2) The advent of the **information and knowledge revolutions** lessened the worker's dependence on a "brick and mortar" workplace and a "flesh and blood" employer. Cyberspace replaces real space and temporary or contractual work are preferred to tenure and corporate "loyalty".

Knowledge is not geography-dependent. It is portable and cheaply reproduced. The geographical locations of the participants in the economic interactions of this new age are transparent and immaterial.

(3) The **mobility of goods and data** (voice, visual, textual and other) increased exponentially. The twin revolutions of transportation and telecommunications reduced the world to a global village. Phenomena like commuting to work and globe-straddling multinationals were first made possible. The car, the airplane, facsimile messages, electronic mail, other forms of digital data, the Internet - demolished many physical and temporal barriers. Workers today often collaborate in virtual offices across continents and time zones. Flextime and work from home replaced commuting. The very concepts of "workplace" and "work" were rendered fluid, if not obsolete.

(4) The **dissolution of the classic workplace** is part of a larger and all-pervasive disintegration of other social structures, such as the nuclear family. Thus, while the choice of work-related venues and pursuits increased - the number of social alternatives to work declined.

The extended and nuclear family was denuded of most of its traditional functions. Most communities are tenuous and in constant flux. Work is the only refuge from an incoherent, fractious, and dysfunctional world. Society is anomic and work has become a route of escapism.

(5) The **ideology of individualism** is increasingly presented as a private case of capitalism and liberalism. People are encouraged to feel and behave as distinct,

autonomous units. The metaphor of individuals as islands substituted for the perception of humans as cells in an organism. Malignant individualism replaced communitarianism. [Pathological narcissism](#) replaced self-love and empathy.

(6) The last few decades witnessed unprecedented successive **rises in productivity and an expansion of world trade**. New management techniques, improved production technologies, innovative inventory control methods, automatization, robotization, plant modernization, telecommunications (which facilitates more efficient transfers of information), even new design concepts - all helped bring workaholism about by placing economic values in the forefront. The Protestant work ethic ran amok. Instead of working in order to live - people began living in order to work.

Workaholics are rewarded with faster promotion and higher income. Workaholism is often - mistakenly - identified with entrepreneurship, ambition, and efficiency. Yet, really it is merely an addiction.

The absurd is that workaholism is a direct result of the culture of leisure.

As workers are made redundant by technology-driven productivity gains - they are encouraged to engage in leisure activities. Leisure substitutes for work. The historical demarcation between work and leisure is lost. Both are commended for their contribution to the economy. Work, like leisure, is less and less structured and rigid. Both work and leisure are often pursued from home and are often experienced as pleasurable.

The territorial separation between "work-place" and "home turf" is essentially eliminated.

Some people enjoy their work so much that it fulfils the functions normally reserved to leisure time. They are the workaholics. Others continue to hate work - but feel disorientated in the new leisure-rich environment. They are not taught to deal with too much free and unstructured time, with a lack of clearly delineated framework, without clear instructions as to what to do, when, with whom, and to what end.

The state, parents, educators, employers - all failed to train the population to cope with free time and with choice. Both types - the workaholic and the "normal" person baffled by too much leisure - end up sacrificing their leisure time to their work-related activities.

Alas, it takes workaholics to create, maintain and expand capitalism. People don't work or conduct business only because they are after the money. They enjoy their work or their business. They find pleasure in it. And this is the true meaning of capitalism: the abolition of the artificial distinction between work and leisure and

the pursuit of both with the same zeal and satisfaction. Above all, the (increasing) liberty to do so whenever, wherever, with whomever you choose.

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